NATHANAEL WEST'S AMERICAN NIGHTMARE FACTORY:

A REAPPRAISAL OF *THE DREAM LIFE OF BALSO SNELL*

Denn für dieses Leben
Ist der Mensch nicht anspruchslos genug
D'rum ist all sein Streben
Nur ein Selbstbetrug

Bertolt Brecht, *Die Dreigroschenoper* (1928)

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Frank Landsman

CHAPTER I
BEWITCHED, BOTHERED AND BEWILDERED

1. The Two R's of Nathan Weinstein

> When I got to know West,
> He had a warm and fanciful
> humor and great erudition that
> made the rest of us feel sort of juvenile
>
> S.J. Perelman

Most American writers of the 19th century were also great readers. Poe, Melville and James all had a vast corpus of literary texts at their elbow, to draw inspiration from and to salute by way of parody and allusion.

This American tradition was continued in the early 20th century by Nathanael West (1903-40), born in New York as Nathan Weinstein. His parents were German-speaking Jewish immigrants from Kovno, Lithuania, which had been Russified around 1881. Young Nathan ("gift" in Hebrew) grew up in this solid middle-class family that could afford a cook, a governess and other German-speaking servants. He was a precocious boy who had read Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy and Flaubert by the age of thirteen.

Having gained admission at Brown University on 57 credits earned by a namesake from Boston, Nathaniel von Wallenstein Weinstein (As West called himself) enjoyed football, wine, women and song, magnificently dressed in dandy-like Brooks Brothers clothes. He owned the largest and most eccentric student library on campus. Soon, he became close friends with S.J. Perelman, who drew cartoons for *The Brown Jug*, a humour magazine. Although tall, Weinstein was kicked out of the Brown basketball team by a coach named Walter Snell. This

man would be (partly) ridiculed through “Balls o’ Snell, or Balso Snell, the principal character in West’s debut piece of fiction.

With a Ph.B degree in his pocket, Nathan Weinstein not only decided to leave New York for Paris, but also to drop his name; he legally changed it into Nathanael West on August 16, 1926. Breton’s *Manifeste du Surréalisme* and the general Parisian atmosphere of *humeur noire* (black humour) attractedWest. He stayed less than three months in Paris, contrary to his own mythical “six years” still copied in blurbs of recent editions of his collected novels.

The French influence on West’s oeuvre ranges from Rabelais, Voltaire and Sade to Flaubert, Proust, and the *enfants terribles* Jarry and Apollinaire. However, as Jay Martin claims, “the German expressionists are no less important than the French as perspectives on and parallels to his native vision. Kafka and Brecht bear as much resemblance to West as the French do”. Edmund Wilson perceived “a kind of eastern European suffering and sense of the grotesque, in common with Gogol and Chagall … a sad, quick Jewish humour, a quality of imagination which was … both Russian and Jewish”. 1

But if his cultural roots led to European art, then West’s American present was crammed with the products of mass culture, the so-called popular arts: slapstick movies, comic strips, romantic pulp fiction, Tin Pan Alley songs and comic short fiction by humorists such as Lardner, Parker, Benchley and Runyon.

By mixing the European “high-brow” art with American popular art in his debut, West is the only writer to have bridged the seemingly “unbridgeable dichotomy between high culture … and catchpenny reality” in America, as discerned by Van Wyck Brooks. 2 If the two camps of “redskins and palefaces” Philip Rahv identified in American literature are anything to go by, West comes out as a peculiar half-breed, the archetypal outcast.

For the ruthless honesty concerning the ugly side of life derived from “redskin” Mark Twain is combined with highly sophisticated literary parody, a genre that had been lying dormant since the untimely death of “paleface” Edgar Allan Poe, to whom West alludes time and again in his works.

West is also an “outcast” in the American literature of the 1930s, that “suffered during the decade because of an excessive reliance on ideological formulas … [when] authors dutifully reduced their novels to political tracts at the behest of cultural commissars in the Communist party”. 3 West did not succumb to this genre, neither to “social reportage”, nor to what he disdainfully labeled the “*muddle-class* realism of Sinclair Lewis and Theodore Dreiser”. 4

Yet West does fit in with one long-standing literary tradition, namely that of “black” or sardonic humour, a constant in comic

literature described by the American post-modernist John Hawkes as ranging from

> Quevedo, the Spanish picaresque writer, and Thomas Nashe … down through Lautréamont, Céline, Nathanael West, Flannery O'Connor, James Purdy, Joseph Heller, myself. This constant is a quality of coldness, detachment, ruthless determination to face up to the enormities of ugliness and potential failure within ourselves and in the world around us, and to bring to this exposure a savage or saving comic spirit and the saving beauties of language. [5]

Neither West's comic inventiveness nor his subtle parodies of literature ranging from the Classics to Chaucer, from Shakespeare to Dostoyevsky to the French *Surréalistes* brought him fame, riches or critical euphoria in his day. Now that two of his novels, *Miss Lonelyhearts* (1933) and *The Day of the Locust* (1939) have been recognized as great works and turned into radio plays and movies, it is time for a reappraisal of his debut, *The Dream Life of Balso Snell* (1931). For in this condensed, highly experimental text West laid down both the innovative style and thematic content he would recycle in the remainder of his small oeuvre.

2. A Comixed Bag of Tricks

> "Oh! I had a nightmare – I wish I could sleep better!"
> *Little Nemo in the Land of Wonderful Dreams* (1925)

Analogous to its first and only edition of five hundred copies, the general reputation of *The Dream Life of Balso Snell* [6] has always been marginal. West's debut fantasy in prose counted a mere sixty pages that, as one British critic remarked nearly forty years later, did

"not deserve reading for their own sake – [they only contributed to the] extra durability of the hardback edition" of the *Complete Works*. [7]

It seems wise to arrive at some sort of diagnosis before *Balso Snell* may be cured of this questionable reputation. The critical consensus has been summed up as follows:

> *Balso Snell* is a juvenile and obscure attack on all art, an incoherent parody … scatological and pretentiously wise … a sneer in the bathroom mirror at Art … schoolboyish … immature … and a hysterical, obscure, disgusted shriek against the intellect, [its conclusion to be interpreted] as a glorification of the physical man. [8]

Its alleged unevenness has been partly explained away by biographical facts:

> The first draft was written in 1924 when West was still in college ... To conclude that the "juvenile" portions are relics of the undergraduate version and that the "mature" portions were written or rewritten later is both tempting and natural. 9

To be fair, West's literary sources and intentions ought to be examined before the end-product can be judged. For in contrast to the scathing British critic mentioned above, West himself regarded his first piece of fiction as "a very professional book, a play on styles ... written as a protest against writing books". 10 West was an astute critic of his own work, judging by the seven years (!) he spent polishing and revising the tiny manuscript of *Balso Snell* from 1924 onwards; the basic ingredients had apparently been cooked up when he was twenty-one. 11

It is not "interesting chiefly because it foreshadows some of the themes which preoccupied West" in his second novel, *Miss Lonelyhearts.* 12 Its professionalism, playful spirit, stylistic virtuosity and rebellious tone are, admittedly, hard to fathom at first glance. Jokes one would sooner expect in the form of graffiti on lavatory walls are interspersed among snobbish, arty name-dropping. This remarkable mélange is dished up on characteristically short, angular bits and pieces, leaving the unprepared reader bewildered and breathless.

In order to appreciate Balso Snell in its fullest sense, respecting West's intentions as expressed by the four criteria mentioned above, an awareness of a peculiar cultural tension prevalent in West's outlook and technique is of crucial importance. Once felt, the accumulative comic effect is quite hilarious. West saw himself as a comic writer, but not as a mere humorist: the realization of this comic dichotomy is actually of thematic interest, as will be shown below.

The tension is created by a deliberate, highly sophisticated juxtaposition of the American popular arts and European "high-brow" literature. This startling, original technique affects both form and meaning in *Balso Snell*. Those who fail to recognize the comic collage of native college humour and continental Art – intertextuality *avant la lettre* – will miss out on both the witty medium and the melancholy message that this kaleidoscopic novelette has to offer.

One of the most striking formal aspects of Balso Snell is, of course, its physical slightness. The "sixty winks" of Balso Snell are subdivided into two parts covering miscellaneous meetings with a host of characters living in the intestines of Homer's famous wooden horse. 13 How Balso ended up there in the first place will be discussed later on.

Part one (divided by lay-out, not by captions) comprises four episodes made up of even shorter fragments: odes, speeches, songs, half a dozen song-titles for one song, a ten-
line story, wisecracks, epigrams, literary quotations, prayers, a journal, love poetry, a pamphlet, a biography, and loads of puns – possibly the shortest “stories” in existence (pp. 3-36).

Part two (pp. 37-56) consists mainly of two letters written by a certain Beagle Darwin [merging ship and scientist], shown to Balso in a dream *within* his dream life; for he falls asleep in “a café built into the side of the intestine” (p. 37) of the Trojan horse. [14] It is rounded off by a brief coda (pp. 56-62): Balso awakes at his café table to learn that the letters are in fact part of an epistolary novel to be finished by his childhood sweetheart Mary McGeeney, whom he had encountered earlier on in his dream but failed to recognise (p. 32). To make up for this error of judgment, he then proceeds to seduce his former belle; thinking wishfully that “the Two became One” (p. 61), Balso climaxes in the more solitary way of a wet dream.

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ENDNOTES TO CHAPTER ONE

1. See Jay Martin, *Nathanael West: The Art of His Life* (1970; rpt. New York: Carroll & Graf, 1984), p. 82 and p. 80. I am indebted to this seemingly definitive biography for the data in my introduction.
2. See Richard H. King, "Modernism and Mass Culture: The Origins of the Debate" in Heinz Ickstadt, Rob Kroes and Brian Lee, eds., *The Thirties* (Amsterdam: Free University Press, 1987), p. 122.
3. See Richard Pells, Radical Visions and American Dreams (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), p. 194.
4. See Martin, op.cit, p. 69.
5. Quoted in Ronald Wallace, The Last Laugh (Columbia & London: Univ. of Missouri Press, 1979), Ch. 3, p. 54.
6. All page references to West's four short novels are to Nathanael West, *Complete Works* (London: Picador, 1983). The first will be abbreviated to *Balso Snell* in this thesis.
7. See W.J. Bellamy, "Nathanael West", review of *The Complete Works of Nathanael West, The Cambridge Quarterly*, Winter 1969, p. 95. Bellamy's claim remains unfounded in this review.
8. See Randall Reid, *The Fiction of Nathanael West* (1967; rpt. Chicago: UCP, 1971), p. 13. The assorted opinions come from, resp., Reid himself, Aaron, Ross, Hyman, Comerchero, and Light.
9. Ibidem, pp. 37-8.
10. See Jay Martin, op.cit., p. 129.
11. Ibid., p. 73. As early as 1924 West told John Sanford "almost all that finally appeared" in *Balso Snell*.
12. See Reid, op.cit., p. 13.
13. "Forty winks" means a short nap – given the dozens of literary winks per page, Balso's dream seems to take forever. Considering its nightmarish and sexual atmosphere a nocturnal setting seems likely. His is a *closed* dream world: we do not get to see Balso's dropping off or waking up to reality. *Balso Snell* is headed by a single "1", lonesome like Balso himself.
14. Charles Darwin embarked on the *H.M.S. Beagle* for South America in 1831.

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